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NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

CAESAR'S BATTLE WITH THE HELVETIANS

In a monograph entitled *Bibracte : Eine kriegsgeschichtliche Studie* (Aarau, 1904) H. Bircher sets forth a new theory with reference to the position of the Helvetian forces after their first encounter with the Romans below Armecy in the summer of 58 B. C.¹ The site of the battlefield is generally conceded to be near the juncture of the Arroux and Auzon rivers just west of Toulon-sur-Arroux. This fact, hinted at by Garenne, was confirmed by Bulliot's unquestioned identification of Bibracte with Mont Beuvray, which Caesar says (*Bell. Gall.* i. 23) was eighteen miles from the point where he left the pursuit of the Helvetians, and by Stoffel's discovery in 1886 of a Roman intrenchment, apparently thrown up hastily, on the hill of Armecy. A study on the spot from the point of view of a practical general of what was likely to take place considering the local topography and the relative position of the two armies convinced Stoffel that after their first unsuccessful encounter with the Romans the Helvetii retreated to an elevation in the direction of the present village of Montmort and that there occurred the second conflict. Caesar's words are, "Tandem vulneribus defessi et pedem referre et, quod mons suberat circiter mille passuum, eo se recipere coeperunt" (*Bell. Gall.* i. 25). Stoffel's argument is one drawn from probability only, since no excavations which might settle the question have been made in the immediate vicinity of Montmort. The theory of Bircher about to be explained is also unsupported by the evidence of excavations.

Bircher's hypothesis was inspired by a desire to offer an easier explanation of the phrase, *latere aperto* (chap. 25) than was afforded by Stoffel's plan of the battle. Usage shows that the *latus apertum* was the right or unprotected flank of the army, and inasmuch as Stoffel's view required Caesar's lines in their second position to face toward the north, it was necessary for him to suppose that the Boii and the Tulingi crossed the rear of the Romans (cf. *circumvenire*, which with Bircher's explanation is without point) and started to attack the enemy on its most vulnerable side, namely the right or east flank. This necessity of making the Boii and Tulingi march so far before striking a blow instead of attacking at the nearest point, the left flank, has been regarded by some as a real difficulty in Stoffel's plan. It is easily explained, however, by the topographical requirements, since a steep ravine immediately west of the Roman position would have made a left flank attack impossible even if

¹ Bircher's theory is supported also by Fröhlich *Die Glaubwürdigkeit Caesars in seinem Bericht über den Feldzug gegen die Helvetier* (Aarau, 1903), pp. 33 f.

the Boii and Tulingi had desired to grapple with the Romans' shield-protected side. In order, therefore, to provide a plan by which the Boii and Tulingi would have first encountered the *latus apertum* of the Romans, Bircher conceives that the Helvetii withdrew from the hill of Armecy southward to an elevation across the stream Auzon. The Romans pursuing had their right thus exposed to the direct attack of the approaching Boii and Tulingi. I repeat that the decision of the question as to which one of these two theories is to be preferred rests at present solely upon the argument of probability, since no excavations have been made upon either site. There is one known fact, however, obtained from the narrative itself of Caesar, which in my judgment demolishes Bircher's theory and tends to confirm Stoffel's, the fact, namely, that after the second encounter the direction of the Helvetians' flight was toward the north. From chaps. 26 and 27 we learn that the scene of the final surrender of the Helvetians was at a considerable distance directly north of where the battle took place. In describing the flight Caesar says, "eaeque tota nocte continenter ierunt; nullam partem noctis itinere intermisso in fines Lingonum pervenerunt." The Helvetii, therefore, arrived *in fines Lingonum*; and the boundaries of the Lingones were north of the Aedui within whose territory the battle occurred. It is perhaps unnecessary to mention the significance also of such topographical references as the attempt of the canton Verbigenus to escape *ad Rhenum finesque Germanorum* (chap. 27), or the entreaty of the Gallic chiefs, prominently the Aedui and the Sequani, that Caesar protect them against the neighboring Germans. Moreover, Caesar distinctly says, "alteri se, ut coeperant, in montem receperunt;" that is, the Helvetii *continued* their flight in the same direction in which they started. If according to Bircher the Romans first drove the retreating Helvetii southward across the Auzon and then pressed upon them hotly forcing them again to attempt to escape, it is contrary to the recognized laws of the human mind and of self-preservation to suppose that the enemy should have turned about arbitrarily and fled in the opposite direction, almost in the face of the Roman soldiers. They would rather have retreated either southward in the direction from which they originally came, or westward in the direction in which they had started the day before the battle. My conviction on first reading Bircher's monograph that he was wrong was confirmed in the summer of 1908 when I again visited the scene of the battle. It is impossible for me to believe that the defeated Helvetii having once been driven southward would or could have crossed the intervening heights and valleys and have turned their faces northward toward a section of mountainous country with which they were totally unfamiliar. Stoffel's theory is still the only one which in the light of the facts seems to me admissible.

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